

# Hmmmmmm.....was that a hummingbird?

by Todd Eskelin



*Rufous hummingbird photographed by Andrew Reding*  
<http://www.inaturalist.org/photos/1917761>.

I am often asked, “What is the smallest bird in Alaska?” That’s easy, the Rufous Hummingbird. Your typical Rufous Hummingbird is less than four inches long and weighs 3.25 grams, only slightly heavier than a penny. People next want to know where they can see a hummingbird. That is a tougher question. Rufous Hummingbirds breed from Northern California up the coast through Prince William Sound. They are known to breed in Portage and have been documented breeding along the south coast of Kachemak Bay. They have not yet been found breeding here in the central Kenai Peninsula, but I am convinced there is a good chance that they might.

Rufous Hummingbirds may be small, but what they lack in size they compensate for with one of the most amazing migrations known in the bird world. During late July these little adventurers leave Alaska and head south to Mexico. If one measures the distance in body lengths, this is a greater migration than the famed Arctic Tern, which flies over 11,000 miles to its wintering area in Antarctica. Many Alaskans head to Mexico for the winter, but we fly in a 737. Pound for pound it would take 78,000,000 hummingbirds to match the weight of one 737 commercial jet.

Chances are you will never find a hummingbird nest, even if it is in your own back yard. Most Rufous Hummingbird nests are made of lichens, moss and fragments of bark, bound together with strands of spider web and lined with soft downy plant ma-

terial like cottonwood fluff. Typically, nests are located in the droopy branches of a large spruce tree about 8 to 12 feet above the ground. In Southeast Alaska they have been known to build nests in ferns and vines overhanging embankments. So, if you can’t find a nest, how do we know where they are breeding? The best way is to watch for them at your flower garden or hummingbird feeder and look for young birds. Soon after they leave the nest, the parents will take the youngsters to their favorite feeding areas and teach them how to find nectar. The parents will collect some nectar while the fledglings are watching nearby. Then you will see the parents go over and regurgitate the nectar to the fluffy little fledglings. So if you have hummingbirds in your yard, pay special attention in the end of June and early July to see if there are any fluffy young birds that do not fly very well. This is a sure sign that there was a nest in your area.

There are several things we can do to attract hummingbirds to our yards. The best way is provide them with plenty of nectar. Hummingbirds require one half of their body weight a day just to stay warm. During late summer they need to store fat for the long migration so they will eat/drink even more. Approximately 85% of their diet is nectar, but they do supplement it with small insects and an occasional spider. Planting the entire yard with showy tubular type flowers like paintbrushes, mints, larkspurs and honeysuckle is a good start at bringing in hummers. Bright red flowers are often favorites for most hummingbirds. Fireweed is also a preferred food in our area. If gardening is not your forte, try hummingbird feeders filled with artificial nectar. These feeders require a lot of maintenance, as they are very susceptible to fungus and mold. It is recommended that these feeders be cleaned at least once per week with soap and hot water. Another problem is that they attract unwelcome visitors like bears and bees. The bear problem can be avoided by hanging the feeder where it is unreachable by bears. If you have a bear visit, take the feeder down and put it away for another year. A well-kept flower garden does a good job at attracting and keeping these tiny birds around.

So the next time you are in the yard and you think you hear a bumblebee buzzing around in the flower

patch, take a second to check and see if it isn't a hummingbird grabbing a bite to eat before a long journey south. There have been a couple of accidental sightings of other hummingbird species in Anchorage like the Costa's Hummingbird a few years ago and Anna's Hummingbird has been seen. If you see any hummingbirds on the Kenai Peninsula, please take a picture, and report your sightings to Todd Eskelin at the Kenai Na-

tional Wildlife Refuge (262-7021).

*Todd Eskelin, a Biological Technician, has conducted bird studies throughout the state specializing in songbirds. He recently accepted a position at the Kenai Refuge where he plans to continue his work with birds. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*